

Parenting Tips

A Guide to Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events



**This Guide is made possible by:
Enfield Youth Services**

How Do Children Experience Trauma?

Just like us, children have a wide range of reactions to a traumatic event. Children who have had personal experiences with loss may have a more intense reaction to events that trigger loss. The most common reactions are:

- A loss of control
- A loss of stability
- A fear for their safety

Their developmental level affects how children react to trauma.



Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Very young children have difficulty understanding the nature of the event, especially if it occurred at a distance and did not affect them directly. They are aware of and reactive to the feelings of adults, and may become frightened for their own safety. They have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally and will often show us their feelings through behavior. Some children may regress and demonstrate younger behaviors such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, and throwing temper tantrums. Children may have nightmares and fears of sleeping alone. This age children may react by showing more separation anxiety when their parents leave them at daycare or school.

Suggestions: Infants pick up on the anxieties and actions of those around them. Try to remain calm when interacting with infants. Maintain routines and usual caretakers if possible. Answer questions in simple terms and reassure child. Watch favorite videos, read books, and play with child to maintain reassurance. Limit anxious adult conversations in front of children.



School-Age Children

Some children in this age group may be able to grasp the reality of the trauma. School-age children are able to focus on the concrete details of the experience and often have specific questions about the event. They can also tell us more directly what they are feeling but often need help understanding the event and clarification that their safety and their families are not compromised. Some children may present a rough exterior or act out with aggressive behavior or play, and still others may attempt to protect themselves through denial or apathy. Others show signs of anxiety.

Suggestions: Offer brief simple explanations with reassurances of safety. Follow the child's lead and respond directly to their questions. Monitor TV and computer news and keep an eye on their reaction to the news. Reassure them that people are safe and that you together as a family are safe. Offer activities to keep them busy. Maintain the child's routines.

Adolescents

These students can engage in the “big” questions about an event and may be able to talk more abstractly about it. Often they ask questions about people’s motivations and think about concepts such as fairness or justice. They can talk directly about their feelings, give their opinions, and are often committed to “doing something” to help. Provide factual information to limit the hype and contagion effect that often sweeps up adolescents.

Suggestions: Be present as much as possible and listen. Watch the TV news with them and engage the teen in conversation – “What did you think when you heard the news? How did you feel when you heard about it?” Share your feelings honestly, but reassure them that as a family you will be safe. Help them express their feels in appropriate ways and offer constructive ways to help (i.e., writing letters, consoling friends, collecting donations, etc.) Establish daily check-in times. Maintain routines.



Helpful Hints for Parents

FIRST: Take care of yourself, seek support from others, and be aware of how you react to the trauma in front of the children. Children are very aware of their parents’ worries, particularly during a crisis. Parents can express some of their worries to their children, but should also stress they can handle the crisis. How a parent responds to a crisis impacts a child’s ability to cope as well.

SECOND: Ask what the child knows or questions about the trauma. A child’s age affects how they understand and how they will respond to trauma. Clarify any misinformation, listen carefully to the child’s concerns, and assess the level of distress or worry that the child may have. Try to get the child’s perspective of the events: “What was the hardest thing for you that you saw or heard? Is there anything else that you haven’t told me or that you’re worried about?”

THIRD: Sort out your child's concerns for personal or family safety. Explore children's worries about completing routine tasks or upcoming events: playing outside, going to bed, going to school, traveling (a child may have specific worries about a plane), separating from parents, mom going on a business trip, dad returning to work, or traveling near where the trauma occurred. Past traumas and fears may re-emerge as children try to master their fears and anxieties about the trauma. Patient listening and not minimizing the child's fears are important.



FOURTH: Maintain routines if possible. Assess your child's level of distress before returning them to out of home activities (i.e., school, sports, extra-curricular activities). Regressive behavior (i.e., tantrums, bedwetting, and bedtime fears) is not unusual in stressed or traumatized children. Parents or caretakers should be physically and emotionally present with their children as much as possible during the crisis. **Limit exposure to media coverage** of disaster or traumatic events. Repeat exposure can continue to overwhelm younger children and can increase their anxiety. Watch and discuss television coverage with school age children and teens, reassuring them of your ability to keep them safe.

FIFTH: Help the child work toward mastering the trauma. Communicate your thought and feelings honestly, taking into account the child's age and maturity, but model how to cope with the stress appropriately (i.e., talking with others, using prayer, offering to help, keeping routines and commitments, taking care of yourself).

Help children understand that disasters are generally rare events and that no one can control everything completely. Also help them understand that bad things can happen, though they were not responsible for the disaster or trauma. Watch to see that children do not develop lasting fears or prejudices based on the disaster or traumatic events.



In time, with reassurance and maintenance of routines and daily relationships, most children can grow from the traumatic experience and continue with normal emotional development. If children are excessively stressed, unable to function in their normal routines, or behaving in dangerous ways, professional help should be sought.

LOCAL RESOURCES

Youth Services

Town of Enfield

253-6380

Child Guidance Clinic

North Central Counseling

253-5020

Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Service

683-8068

Infoline 1-800-203-1234

Or 211

The Family Resource Center

253-5144

For more information on Children and Tragedy

Call Enfield Youth Services

253-6380